

Review of Benjamin Griffin *Playing the Past: Approaches to English Historical Drama 1385-1600* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001)

Any scholar whose bibliography distinguishes 'primary' from 'secondary' works is boldly refuting recent literary theory which dissolves this distinction. Griffin finds recent critical work unpersuasive--he is particularly sceptical of claims of subversiveness--but he descends to vulgarity in collapsing the intellectual variety of poststructuralism into the single figure of Michel Foucault (xi-xii). Like Foucault, Griffin is concerned with classificatory habits. The Tudor view of history plays was shaped by what had already been classified, and Griffin argues that to understand the phenomenon of the English history play one should study not the prose narratives which the dramatists plundered for material but rather the genealogy of the genre. We should "understand the history play by way of the history of plays".

The history play genre was already forming when the Armada was defeated, and Griffin shows that despite terminological confusions (such as the 1600 quarto of *The Most Excellent Historie of the Merchant of Venice*) there was by the 1590s a generic distinction which Heminges and Condell's 1623 Folio categorization ("The Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies") merely sharpened. What makes the history play unlike other genres is "the fact of the plot's immersion in a historical continuum; this means that an *aesthetic* sense of either beginning or ending is frustrated". Being so embedded, the history play requires an audience that knows its history, although like Jonson's Fitzdottrel in *The Devil is an Ass* they might have got that from previous plays. In parts Griffin's book reads like a PhD thesis (which it formerly was), particularly in pulling its rhetorical punches: the concluding paragraphs meekly opens "I believe that the main quality I have emphasized . . .". It is nonetheless deserving of attention from literary scholars for its meticulousness and its comprehensive surveying of one genre instanced in examples from three centuries.

301 words

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